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JOHN WILSON AS AN ESSAYIST.

On taking up a book for the first time, the desire naturally arises on the part of the reader to know something of the person who wrote it. So strong is this feeling in some persons that they declare themselves unable to enjoy a book until they have been, as it were, introduced to its author. This is no mere fancy, but a natural prompting, and it is true for a good psychological reason. Every book of merit possesses something of the personality of its author; and the deeper its source, the greater the worth of the book. The best thing in literature is life, and books are valuable chiefly in proportion as they help us to get back to life. A powerful, original, and engaging personality, therefore, if it has the faculty of expression at all, is sure to make a deep impress by its utterances. These qualities John Wilson, contributor to *Blackwood's* for many years, possessed, and they are the source of his greatness as an author.

Wilson's broad range of sympathies brought him into close relations with many interests. He had the power of projecting his individuality into everything he did. Always impressionable and responsive, he possessed the faculty also of distinguishing the true from the false in any subject. This ability, coupled with his remarkable ease and fluency of expression, at once qualified him eminently for success in the broad field of literature. The twelve large volumes that contain most of his collected works show how prolific a pen was his; yet at no time in his career can he be described as distinctively a man of letters.

Beginning life as a country gentleman, Wilson found, amidst the gayeties and pleasures with which he had surrounded himself, recreation in the cultivation of poetry. The publication of "The Isle of Palms," the year after his departure from Oxford, brought him into a sort of rivalry with Scott, who admired the poem greatly. Poetry was with him,

however, never more than a pastime. Financial reverses in 1815, making him in a measure dependent on his own exertions, drove him to the bar. But the law proved uncongenial, and was soon abandoned for more agreeable work.

Ever since his schoolboy days Wilson had been a great reader and an amateur in literature, having won at Oxford the Newdigate prize in poetry. When Blackwood quarreled with his editors, Cleghorn and Pringle, in the summer of 1817, and organized a new staff of contributors to his magazine, Wilson became a member of this new board. His strong hand, felt for the first time in the memorable October number of *Blackwood's* for 1817, never forgot its cunning, and for a third of a century continued to pour forth a torrent of articles, critical, imaginative, descriptive, in almost bewildering profusion.

Seldom has such a storm been raised by a periodical publication as was caused by the famous Number Seven of *Blackwood's* above referred to. The magazine now stood as an avowed supporter of Tory principles, and, therefore, as the enemy of the *Edinburgh Review*. Bitter were the vials of wrath and invective that it poured out upon the heads of offending Whigs.

Among the scurrilous articles in the first number under the new organization was the notorious "Chaldee Manuscript," originally written by the Ettrick Shepherd, Hogg, greatly enlarged by Wilson, and filled with pepper by Lockhart. This article was omitted from a second edition, but the policy set by this first issue was adhered to through the succeeding years. Each number contained one or more articles of the flagrant sort, always penetrating and with a large element of truth, but, on the whole, unjust and abusive, and generally discreditable to the writer. Books to be reviewed and articles to appear were announced months ahead, and many an unoffending Whig was kept in a fever of excitement, fearing his day of chastisement might be near at hand.

In such a lionlike manner Wilson burst upon the literary world of his day. With such facility did articles of various

kinds flow from his pen, and so completely did he dominate the spirit and policy of the magazine, that he was for a long time thought to be its editor. It is now positively known, however, that he never performed editorial functions, some of his own articles having been altered or rejected at the discretion of William Blackwood, who was the editor as well as the proprietor of the magazine. It may be noticed in passing, as a thing unique in the history of periodical publications, that, during the eighty-seven years of the *Blackwood's* existence, the magazine has been edited and owned by the Blackwood family, father and son, through four generations; and the policy fixed by Wilson and his coworkers has been, in large measure, continued to the present day.

The election of Wilson to the chair of Moral Philosophy in the University of Edinburgh, in 1820, did not seriously interfere with his contributions to *Blackwood's*. In 1822 he began a series of articles entitled "*Noctes Ambrosianæ*," which is, in some respects, a faithful reproduction of the wit and wisdom that enlivened the long winter evenings at Ambrose's tavern in Edinburgh; rarefied and idealized and vastly improved, however, in the crucible of Wilson's exuberant spirits and inexhaustible wit.

These articles became immensely popular and developed another kind of interest in the magazine. If the stinging reviews had been too strong diet for certain weak stomachs, here was something eminently palatable and savory to everybody. There are few things in the history of periodical literature to compare with them. Probably the appearance in this country, of Lowell's "*Biglow Papers*" in the *Boston Courier*, during our war with Mexico, produced a somewhat similar sensation. While a delighted public greeted with eager enthusiasm the Yankee wit and shrewdness of the successive installments of "*Biglow*" as they appeared, they were no less amused and impressed by the grim earnestness of the writer, and the sound principles of philosophy that he enunciated. The sense of this statement may also stand for Wilson's "*Noctes*," if we omit the "grim earnestness." The

"Noctes" ran in the magazine for thirteen years without waning in popularity, certainly a remarkable fact in the history of periodical literature; and when the series came to a close, an important means of entertainment was removed from thousands of British homes.

If the "Noctes" seems too boisterous for present-day taste, it is because our day demands something different from that which pleased our grandfathers three-quarters of a century ago. While Wilson was probably not overrefined in nature, any want of delicacy should not be attributed to natural grossness so much as to exuberance of spirits and an enormous faculty for enjoying. Unusual power is apt to manifest itself irregularly. Articles that for more than a dozen years kept a reading public aglow with expectancy and threw them into convulsions of laughter, brought sunshine and enjoyment to thousands of homes, and lightened the burden of many a weary heart, must be accounted to have contributed something to the world's happiness, and deserve, at our hands, the recognition of merit.

While the "Noctes" was running, Wilson's busy pen was producing a wilderness of other articles on widely different subjects. His prodigal faculties seemed to turn without apparent effort from mere entertainment to the discussion of themes philosophical, speculative, political, descriptive, critical. In one year he contributed to the twelve issues of the magazine fifty-four separate articles, and it is claimed that the best in each issue was from his pen. Yet all of this was but the product of idle moments, as it were, fragments of time snatched from the official duties of his professorship, which he performed for more than thirty years with distinction. His capacity for work, and the ease with which he performed it, are almost without parallel. It is doubtful whether even Macaulay surpassed him in the ready use of his vast store of information; and among all the great men of his time, it would be difficult to find another who performed so great an amount of work with so little real effort.

The greater part of these remarkable compositions must

now be passed by without further notice, while we examine a little more in detail Wilson as a critic. It is in this field that he achieved his work of greatest permanent value. While he is always interesting, fresh, and original, it is his critical work chiefly that ranks him with the greater essayists of the nineteenth century, and gives him a permanent place in literature.

In several ways Wilson was eminently endowed with critical powers. His remarkably sympathetic nature brought him into such a spiritual rapport with an author and his work as few men could have experienced. In a less independent character than Wilson's, this quality would have produced a mere eulogist, wholly unfitted as a critic. By his power of insight he was intellectually quick to distinguish between what was profound and what was mere fog in the mind of the writer. His hatred of all kinds of sham and insincerity made him apt to detect any false sentiment and tricks of thought or expression, which were sure to bring down with emphasis the cudgel of his condemnation.

It must be admitted that at times the very wealth of his faculties led him into extravagances and inconsistencies, for which it is not easy to excuse him. Yet it should be remembered that those were intense times, and wars of words were common. Although his harsh critical strictures frequently raised a storm of anger against him, he did not find pleasure in "whipping" simply for its own sake. All sorts of cant and artificiality he heartily despised, and his one aim as a critic was to cultivate a taste for that which is true, direct, and manly in literature, as in life. It may be possible that he was sometimes over-harsh in his methods of lashing or shaming a young author out of a false position; but if the chastisement was severe, it was so because of his sincere desire to turn youthful genius into right paths.

The case of Tennyson may be cited as a concrete example of Wilson's method, and of his influence as a critic. Tennyson's first volume of poems that attracted notice was that of 1830. This was reviewed by Wilson in *Blackwood's Magazine* for May, 1832. It was a thin volume containing no long

poems, but many short ones, experiments, it would seem, in a variety of keys and measures. For the purpose of review, Wilson divided the poems into two classes, the good and the bad. Taking up the latter class first, he quoted many of them, entire or in part, and pointed out in clear and convincing terms wherein they were bad, indifferent, or hopelessly bad. He did not spare the author in exposing his false sentiment, his affected style, and whatever other notes of insincerity he discovered; and he strongly impressed upon him the necessity of cultivating his powers along right lines. In all his censure, the critic assumed a paternal attitude toward the poet, spoke to him in terms of authority, and admonished him with the loving interest of a father.

In commendation of Tennyson's merits, Wilson was fully as enthusiastic as he had been severe in the censure of his faults. He perceived, in the better verses, the promise of a great poet. Sincerity, individuality, and simplicity, he pointed out as the impulses for the young poet to follow. And he was not slack in predicting the poet's future greatness, if he would but develop his powers in a natural way. It says much for the critical ability of Wilson that he discerned in Tennyson, at this early date, the future laureate, and foretold the time when, with proper development, millions would join him in proclaiming that "Alfred Tennyson is a poet."

Tennyson was not a little nettled by this review of his poems; but, although he felt keenly the smart of the critic's lash, he had the good sense to profit by his sound advice. A comparison of the poems with Wilson's article to-day shows that, with scarcely an exception, the poems condemned were either improved or omitted from the later editions. This fact is equally commendatory of the critical powers of the reviewer and of the poetical sense of the poet. With riper development, the maturer judgment of the poet confirmed that of the critic.

I have given in some detail the history of this one article, for I can in no better way set forth Wilson's methods as a critic and the influence of his work. This instance may be taken as an example of his critical work in general, without going far wrong.

A service not very different from that done for Tennyson, Wilson performed also for our American poet, Bryant. There was this difference, however: Bryant had never affected the fantastic, nor formed artificial habits in poetry, and consequently did not have these things to unlearn. Wilson demolished certain erroneous ideas, however, that had been entertained as to the nature and value of Bryant's poetry. Up to the time of Wilson's review, it was generally held that the American poet's treatment of nature was in every way original, and, since the poems were short, therefore condensed. Wilson showed that in both of these respects the judgment was wrong.

Bryant's poetry is, in fact, never greatly condensed, as Wilson pointed out. His nature poems are sketches rather than studies. He does not, as a rule, enter profoundly into a subject, but gives the passing, often the spectacular, and always the manifest aspects of it. As to originality, Wilson showed also that Bryant is essentially original but not historically so. Wordsworth had anticipated him by nearly a score of years. Consequently he did not, as Wordsworth had done, contribute a new view point to poetry in the English tongue.

Wilson bestowed upon Bryant the richest praise for his sincerity and the simplicity of his manner. He showed that the introduction of the American background into poetry is Bryant's peculiar work. The poet's independence in seeing nature with his own eyes and portraying it as he saw it deserves high praise, and Wilson was not loath to bestow it. So clearly did he define Bryant's position as poet, both historically and essentially, that many mooted questions as to his work were cleared up once for all.

It must not be inferred, from what has been said, that Wilson's critical judgments were never mistaken. Neither should it be assumed that as an essayist he was without faults. Indeed, with all his merits, he had one or two faults of a flagrant sort. His too great severity has already been referred to. While his stinging criticisms generally were just and helpful, it is also unfortunately true that there are instances when his

assaults were coarse beyond extenuation, and from which beneficial results were not to be expected.

As an artist in literature, the worst thing that can be said about Wilson is, that his work lacks literary form. His paragraphing is sometimes far from good, and his sentences frequently leave the impression of carelessness and haste. These faults are not to be wondered at, however, when we consider the rapidity with which nearly all of his work was produced. But when all has been said for and against his work, the fact remains that Professor Wilson was one of the most remarkable men of his time. Had he written nothing but "*Noctes Ambrosianæ*," he would be ranked among the wits of the nineteenth century. Had he applied himself to poetry, he might have become a formidable rival of Scott in his own territory. If he had confined himself to practical politics, he could have become, if his published essays may serve as a basis of judgment, an authority on jurisprudence and political relations. In the world of imagination, he suggests De Quincey in the fantasies and vagaries of the dream world of unreality. Had he produced nothing except those discriminating and stimulating criticisms, he would unquestionably be one of the noteworthy and, to us, one of the best beloved of English critics. Should it so have happened that he had not written at all, Professor Wilson would still be remembered as a popular and inspiring lecturer who filled a chair in the University of Edinburgh. And I may yet add that, had he neither written nor lectured on philosophy, the world would not yet have forgotten him as one of the great conversationalists and engaging personalities which the first half of the nineteenth century produced. A man that could perform so many things and do them all well is not to be quarreled with because he did not do everything in a faultless manner.

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